What Makes a Quality Hunt

Editor's Note: This version of From Both Sides *is slightly different than previous essays. Since this column debuted in June, we've provided background on an issue that can be approached from two sides, and listed points for consideration for both sides. This month we address a topic – What Makes a Quality Hunt? – that has many sides.*

Instead of presenting points on two sides of an issue, we offer examples of different experiences on which people base their judgment of quality.

Hunting is part of human nature. Early humans depended on wild animals to provide food they needed to survive, but over the last few thousand years much of the world's population has evolved into agricultural societies that depend on domesticated livestock and poultry, not hunted animals, for meat in their diet.

And yet, the human instinct and desire to hunt still prevails. Millions of people in North America pursue and eat wild game, but for most, success or failure is no longer a life or death matter. No pheasants for the day means a chicken dinner instead.

While hunting is no longer a *necessary* means of providing food for most people, it is, however, an important pursuit. Today, while tasty, healthy, wild game meat is a primary product of a successful hunt, people who participate are after more than meat. They're after an experience, or a certain level of personal satisfaction – which may or may not involve putting their own meat on the table – that makes it worth their investment of time and money, and makes them want to do it again.

The same is true for many other human activities that aren't absolutely vital to staying alive, but make life a lot more interesting. If people enjoy doing something, they have time, and can afford it, they will probably keep doing it.

In Search of Quality Hunting

These days, discussions on hunting often deal with satisfaction, or what individuals characterize as "quality" in their outdoor experiences. Most hunters don't need to bag a limit or kill a trophy buck to gain satisfaction and mark down their hunt as a quality experience.

On the other hand, hunters need to have opportunities for success every so often to keep up their interest. A poor wingshot who burns a box of shells at ducks or pheasants every time out, and hardly ever brings anything home, is going to be a lot happier than a skilled shotgunner who can't seem to find a place to go.

Every hunter evaluates the quality of an outing by three common characteristics: aesthetics or sense of place; opportunities to bag game; and space. On a scale of one to 10, a perfect 10 would be a day when you hunted in an ideal setting, had plenty of opportunities to shoot and if you didn't get a limit it was your own fault; and no one else was around.

The opposite end – a zero – would be that the only place you could find to hunt had no game and was crowded with others who had the same problem.

The scale for measuring quality slides back and forth depending on the variables. Excellence in one category can override a deficiency in another. For instance, a plowed field isn't all that aesthetic, but if you're hiding there in the dirt and geese are coming into your decoys, you'll mark it down as a quality outing. Maybe not a 10, but well above average.

If the birds aren't flying over your place in the plowed field, maybe the quality meter drops below five. Maybe the birds are flying, but another group of hunters came in late and set up 300 yards downwind from you, and they got most of the shooting instead. The quality meter drops toward zero.

What if that late-coming group wasn't all that smart, or was at least courteous, and set up 300 yards upwind of you instead, and you got most of the shooting? Where does the quality meter settle?

The final evaluation depends on individual hunter expectations, and that's why it's so difficult to come up with a standard for quality. What some people will happily accept as quality will cause others to quit.

One hunter might give 10 points to a deer hunt in a great place with no one around, and take complete satisfaction in working hard all day and taking a doe or small buck. Another might rate their day a 10 if they shot a trophy buck, even if their tree stand was strapped to a light pole in the West Acres Shopping Center parking lot in Fargo.

The following scenarios will give readers a chance to ponder not just both sides, but the many sides, of determining a quality hunt.

A Field of Geese

Hunter A and his group are looking to hunt geese. They arrive in an area a day or two before they plan to hunt, scout, get permission to hunt on private land, assess the weather, set up decoys according to the day's wind forecast, shoot a couple of geese apiece, and go home satisfied.

Hunter B likes to hunt geese. He books with an outfitter and shows up late the night before the hunt, has coffee while the guide sets decoys, sits where the guide tells him to sit, shoots when the guide tells him to

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shoot, and bags a limit of Canada geese and a couple of snow geese and goes home satisfied.

In their minds, A and B each experienced a quality hunt.

To Each Their Own

Group A consists of eight pheasant hunters who decide to open the season in an area with the highest bird densities in the state. They arrived early in the morning and, since they had failed to make landowner contacts earlier, spent a frustrating half-day trying to find a place to hunt. After being turned down numerous times, they finally found a field.

Group members spread out, lined up behind dogs, and began marching through the field, and in two hours had a daily limit of 24 birds.

Group B is a father and son, who travel to an area that has far fewer pheasants, but they have made prior arrangements with a landowner. They hunt all day long, walking through prairie and brush. They take time to look at plants and insects, and enjoy a short nap on a warm hillside. Dad shoots a pheasant and the boy shoots two grouse. After hunting, they return to their camper, watch the sun set and the stars come out, and make plans to do the same thing the next day.

Which group had a higher quality hunt? How long will the young hunter remain satisfied with limited opportunities when he knows there are places where a hunter can see hundreds of pheasants in a day instead of a handful? How long will members of the larger group tolerate the frenzy before they break away to try to find another area with fewer birds, fewer hunters, easier access to places to hunt, and a much slower pace?

Crowd Tolerance

The morning before duck season opens, Hunter A scouts a public land marsh he has hunted for years. It holds enough ducks to offer promise for the next day, so he makes plans to arrive the next morning early enough to get set up before shooting time. That evening, Hunter B and Hunter C also scout this same marsh and also make plans to hunt there.

On opening morning, Hunter A arrives first and is halfway through his long walk to his hunting spot when B and C arrive. When shooting time arrives, Hunter A notes two other sets of decoys on the marsh. It is the first time he has experienced more than one other group on the same area. He gets a couple of ducks for the day, but is disappointed because many would-be opportunities were spoiled by the other hunters shooting or wading after birds.

Hunter B also gets a few ducks, but for him, it's a great morning. He's accustomed to hunting public land that is considerably more crowded and welcomes a setting where only two other groups occupy space on a relatively large marsh.

Hunter C shoots two boxes of shells, knocks down three ducks, retrieves one, and has the best hunt of his life.

Again, different people have different benchmarks for quality, and those benchmarks depend on a variety of personal factors – age, experience, upbringing, etc.

How do you measure quality? What's the most important factor to you, space, place, or opportunities? To pass along your thoughts, send us an email at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.